

EARLY SHIPPING AND SHIPBUILDING ON THE TWELVE

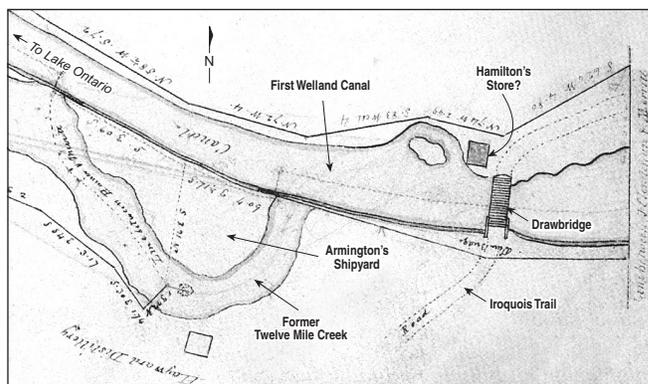
My last article described the voyage of the *Ann and Jane* and *R. H. Boughton* that marked the opening of the First Welland Canal in November 1829. These schooners are rightly celebrated as the first ships to pass through the completed canal. However, they were not the first ships to navigate the waterway. Another vessel, aptly named the *Welland Canal*, did this 18 months earlier, and unlike the other two it was built in St. Catharines itself.

No ships are known to have been built in St. Catharines before this, but vessels of some kind were no doubt able to approach the village by following Twelve Mile Creek from Lake Ontario. What sort of vessels they were, however, is uncertain, as is the distance they were able to travel up the creek.

The Twelve Mile Creek of pre-canal days was nothing like its modern counterpart, now a broad artificial channel excavated in the late 1940s to discharge water from the DeCew Power Station at Power Glen (this being the latest in a series of enlargements starting with the First Welland Canal). The original creek was meandering and narrow, and we know from the water-supply problems faced by William Hamilton Merritt at his mills near present-day Welland Vale that the flow could be very erratic. The creek may not have attained any sort of magnitude until it neared Lake Ontario.

There it opened into the Twelve Mile (now Martindale) Pond, which had formed behind a shoreline bar that constricted the exit to the lake. The original pond may have been more like a marshy, reed-filled wetland, through which the creek passed along a winding channel. Writing in 1875, J. P. Merritt says that it did not become a “lake” until a dam was built at the creek mouth (presumably the waste weir constructed for the First Welland Canal).

In the late 1780s, Queenston merchant-trader Robert Hamilton built a “trading establishment” or store on the creek, near what is now downtown St. Catharines. It was probably located where an important east-west route, the so-called Iroquois Trail (later St. Paul Street), crossed the creek — roughly at the low level bridge above Burgoyne Bridge today. A First Welland Canal plan from about 1831 shows a building at this spot alongside a drawbridge over the canal, and the accompanying surveyor’s notes identify it as a storehouse. Though Hamilton died two decades earlier in 1809, it is not unreasonable to suppose that this was the site of his store. It lay in lot 18, concession 7 of Grantham Township, and Registry Office documents prove that Hamilton did own this piece of land.



Portion of map, ca. 1831, showing land purchased from William Hamilton Merritt and John Hainer by the Welland Canal Company.

The store sold items to local settlers, and may also have served as a transshipment point for goods from Hamilton’s grist and saw mills three miles upstream at the Niagara Escarpment. Both mills were deep in the valley of the Twelve Mile Creek at the base of the Escarpment (at what is today Power Glen). Hamilton had acquired the partly-built mills in 1786 on the death of their original owner, Duncan Murray, and in the same year won a contract to supply flour to the garrison along the Niagara River.

Since farmers no doubt patronized the store when they brought grain for milling, it may be asked why the store was not built closer to the mills. Proximity to St. Catharines is definitely not the reason, for the village did not yet exist. The store location was probably chosen because the Iroquois Trail (which ran westward from Hamilton’s main store in Queenston) crossed the creek at this point, and possibly because it was the head of navigation for all but very small boats. The original crossing was likely a ford, but a bridge would have been built at an early date, thus creating even more of a barrier to navigation (though the first mention of a bridge does not come until much later, in the *Minutes of the Grantham Township meeting for 1819*).

One can picture products from the mills being brought by wagon or some other means to the store, and transferred to boats for transport to the Niagara River. These would likely have been batteaux — narrow, flat-bottomed, shallow-draft vessels, propelled along the creek using poles and oars, and possibly fitted with rudimentary masts and sails for use on the lake itself. Batteaux were commonplace on creeks in the Peninsula in early times, as witness many references to them during the War of 1812.

Some of this is of course conjecture, for conclusive evidence does not exist. It is possible that batteaux were in fact able to travel upstream beyond the Iroquois Trail, even all the way to the Escarpment. Indeed, an article in *The Anglo-American Magazine* for 1853 speaks of boats ascending to Hamilton's mills around 1800. But this is not an authoritative source, and errors in it do not inspire confidence. (Interestingly, the Grantham Navigation Company was incorporated in 1838 with a view to canalizing the creek from St. Catharines to the Escarpment, but what was achieved is unknown.)

There is also uncertainty about the navigability of the Twelve by larger boats such as schooners. Military vessels moored off the mouth of the Twelve during the War of 1812, and William Hamilton Merritt wrote later that the Twelve was "the place our boats landed, generally." More specifically, he stated in his *War Journal* that on September 20, 1813 he concluded a "passage to the 12 Mile Creek ... at the head of the Navigation, adjoining my father's farm." Since he had just sailed across Lake Ontario he must have been on a schooner or similar ship. His father Thomas Merritt owned lots 20 and 21 in concession 4 of Grantham Township (between Carlton and Scott Streets today), which would place the head of navigation for schooners near the southern or upper end of the Twelve Mile Pond.

After the war the younger Merritt acquired and rebuilt a pair of grist and saw mills at Welland Vale, added a potashery and established a salt works further upstream. In 1816 he recorded in his journal that he "loaded 50 barrels of salt on schooner *Industry*, for Port Hope," and in 1817 he conveyed lumber by raft to Niagara and flour and ashes by schooner to Kingston. These and other examples suggest that schooners were able to continue beyond the pond. It is not known, however, where the loading of Merritt's goods took place, whether on site or downstream at the head of the pond. Nor is it known how the boats were propelled if they headed up the creek proper, since there was no towpath and it would have been very difficult to navigate a winding channel under sail.

Clues are also provided by the engineers that the Welland Canal Company engaged in the early 1820s to survey possible canal routes. For example, Samuel and James Clowes wrote in 1824, "in regard to the harbor ... there is a natural bason [sic] capable of holding 500 sail of Vessels, drawing 7 feet of water and ... they can proceed 3 miles into the interior without incurring one shilling additional expense to the four foot canal." They seem to be saying that the creek was navigable beyond the pond, but unfortunately their meaning is not entirely clear.

Any doubts about the navigability of the Twelve were removed with construction of the First Canal, which began in November 1824. Though the project as a whole was plagued by delays and took much

longer than expected — the canal did not open until November 1829 — the section along the Twelve Mile Creek between St. Catharines and Lake Ontario was completed much earlier. On November 7, 1827 *The Farmers' Journal* reported that "The two locks between St. Catharines and the Harbour, are now completed, and the canal is filled ... The lock at the harbour will be in readiness in a few days, when all vessels on Lake Ontario drawing not over 8 feet water, may ascend and return to and from this village with the greatest facility."

A week later, it was reported that on November 6 the President and several Directors of the Canal Company had "passed down the canal, thro' the locks, from this place [St. Catharines] to the Harbour, and returned ... highly gratified with the appearance and probable usefulness of that part of this great work which is now completed." What boat they used is not stated, which is unfortunate since this was the first known voyage on the canal — a full six months before the *Welland Canal* and two years before the *Ann and Jane* and *R. H. Boughton*.

One possibility is that the vessel in question was the packet boat *Experiment*, which had been brought to St. Catharines late in 1826 "by a number of our spirited countrymen, for the accommodation of pleasure parties on the canal between the Harbour and St. Catharines." The *Experiment* came from the Erie Canal in New York State, and was transported over land from Chippawa (a practice not uncommon during the War of 1812). There is no record of it being used for its intended purpose — and hopes of getting it on the canal at an early date were in vain — but there is some evidence to suggest that it spurred a move to build "a much larger and handsomer boat" in St. Catharines itself. This was the start of St. Catharines' shipbuilding industry.

The first steps were taken in January 1827, with meetings of "Friends of the Welland Canal" at the Merchants' Exchange tavern. On the 22nd it was resolved "to build a Canal Boat of suitable dimensions for the conveyance of passengers and freight, from Port Dalhousie to the River Welland." The boat, named the *Saint Catharines*, was to be 80 feet long, 17 feet across the beam, and draw 3½ feet of water. A committee was struck to receive subscriptions for stock, which were taken up "with the greatest cheerfulness and avidity."

What happened to the *Saint Catharines* is not clear, for it is not mentioned again — at least not under that name. But eleven months later at year's end, H. N. Monson, a merchant and canal contractor, announced that "a vessel of 100 tons burthen" was under construction, to be completed in the spring. Then on April 23, 1828 *The Farmers' Journal* reported the launch of a schooner named the *Welland Canal of St. Catharines*. Whether it was a redesign of the *Saint Catharines* (it was certainly bigger) or a new boat altogether is unknown.

The owners of the *Welland Canal* were Monson, William Hamilton Merritt and William Chase. It was built by Russell Armington, “a master builder” who ran a shipyard in Troy, New York, before coming to St. Catharines. Evidence from First Welland Canal surveys and plans shows that his yard was just north of today’s Burgoyne Bridge, a site later occupied by the well-known Shickluna shipyard. As the map reproduced above shows, it was actually on an island created when a meander of the Twelve Mile Creek was truncated by the channel of the canal.

The *Welland Canal’s* captain (and supervisor of construction) was Job Northrup, who by all accounts was quite the character. He came from Connecticut around 1821, and bought Thomas Merritt’s land near the head of the Twelve Mile Pond, where he became a prosperous farmer. Rumour was that he had amassed a fortune in mysterious circumstances in South America, and J. P. Merritt said it all when he wrote, “Privateer, buccaneer or commodore, his role among us was to spend money. His turn-outs were the best, his dinners the finest, and his social qualities unbounded.”

With Commodore (as he was styled) Northrup at the helm, the *Welland Canal* took its maiden voyage from St. Catharines to Port Dalhousie on May 10, 1828, described by *The Farmers’ Journal* as “the free and uninterrupted passage of the first loaded vessel that ever floated on the waters of the Welland canal.” If the voyage of the *Ann and Jane* and *R. H. Boughton* a year and a half later was somewhat of an anticlimax (recall from my last article that the planned celebrations had to be cancelled), the *Welland Canal* took to the water with full ceremony.

Guests on board included the Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, Sir Peregrine Maitland, as well as the Receiver General, Attorney General and Solicitor General. The passengers were treated to “a cold collation and other refreshments” in the “elegantly finished and furnished cabin, which had been bountifully provided by the Captain.” Enthusiatic spectators lined the banks, cheering and firing off muskets as “the vessel moved ... majestically upon this channel ... artificially formed by human power, with her stately masts towering above the trees of the forest on either bank, through a tract of country which scarcely two score years ago was a howling wilderness.”

On arrival at Port Dalhousie toasts were raised to the King and his representative, to the Constitution, the Company and its engineers, the schooner and the canal itself, and after “3 times 3 more hearty cheers ... the company retired, many of them with their bosoms swelling ... if not overflowing with gratitude to the great and all wise Disposer of events, for having benignantly [sic] smiled upon ... the laudable designs of the projector of this great national work.” The “projector” was of course

William Hamilton Merritt, who was on a fund-raising visit to England and missed the whole affair.

A few days later, having loaded up with additional cargo (now totalling over 1000 barrels), the *Welland Canal* sailed on to Lake Ontario. The destination was Prescott on the St. Lawrence, at that time an important transshipment point for goods moving from the Great Lakes eastwards towards Montreal, Quebec and the Atlantic Ocean. By the end of the month the schooner was back in St. Catharines, loading up for a second trip to Prescott.

Russell Armington continued to build ships in St. Catharines. In April 1829 he launched the “elegant schooner” *Peacock*, and in May announced his intention of establishing his shipyard permanently on the Twelve. He next built two smaller, flat-bottomed canal boats, then in May 1831 launched another schooner, the *Erie and Ontario*. The *William H. Merritt* followed in 1832. By the mid-1830s, however, Armington was suffering considerable ill health, and he passed away in 1837.

The shipyard site had been leased from William Hamilton Merritt, and in 1838 the lease was assumed by Louis Shickluna. By coincidence, his first job was to do repair work on the *Welland Canal*, which seems to have fallen on hard times since its triumphal launch in 1828. By 1833 Job Northrup was advertising the boat for sale, and his advertisement read tellingly, “After a few more Locks on the Welland Canal will have been widened ... this schooner will be able to make the trip of both Lakes for which she was originally intended.” Northrup died soon after, and the following year R. E. Burns was advertising the schooner, which was “intended for the canal but owing to some mistake cannot pass the locks above St. Catharines.”

Some mistake, indeed! Not all the locks on the First Welland Canal were the same size. The first three locks were made larger than the rest (130 x 32 feet, as opposed to 110 x 22 feet) to allow steamships to reach St. Catharines, and the *Welland Canal* passed through them with ease. But it was too big for the remainder and could not travel beyond the village, which greatly lessened its usefulness. Of course, by 1845 the Second Canal with its much larger locks had been completed, and one likes to think that this gave the *Welland Canal* a new lease of life, but we do not know its ultimate fate.

Sources (in addition to those cited in the text): Cruikshank, *Documentary History of War of 1812*; Duquemin, *Historic Welland Canals*; Guillet, *Early Life in Upper Canada*; Jackson, *St. Catharines*; Merritt, *Merritt Biography*; Wilson, *Enterprises of Robert Hamilton*; *Merritt Papers*; First Welland Canal plans and documents; Welland Canal Company *Minutes, Correspondence and Directors’ Reports*; *Third Report* (of committee of inquiry into management of Welland Canal); *Farmers’ Journal* and other contemporary newspapers; *Records of Niagara*.

Acknowledgement: Map reproduced courtesy of Brock University Special Collections and Archives